

Children and young people's mental health and speech and language therapy

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Key issues

- Many children and young people with mental health conditions also have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).
- NHS Digital research has found that those with a mental health disorder report having speech or language problems five times more than those without.ⁱ
- One study found that 81% of children with social, emotional and mental health needs have significant unidentified language deficits.ⁱⁱ
- 45% of young people referred to mental health services have been found to have language difficulties.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Unsupported SLCN are a risk factor which may increase the likelihood that a young person will experience mental ill health.
- SLCN is often hidden and unidentified, preventing young people from accessing and benefiting from therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy, which rely on language skills.
- Unmet speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are linked to poorer life outcomes, including school exclusion, involvement in offending behaviour, and long-term mental health difficulties.

Role of speech and language therapists

- Speech and language therapists (SLTs) are essential across all levels of children and young people's mental health services — from prevention and early intervention to specialist and inpatient care.
- SLTs support the development of communication skills which are a protective factor for good mental health.
- They identify and support communication needs that can underlie or exacerbate anxiety, depression, behavioural issues, and self-esteem difficulties.
- SLTs help children and young people understand and express emotions, form relationships, and engage meaningfully in therapy.
- They also train and advise wider mental health teams on communication-inclusive practice, adapt therapeutic materials, and support families and educators to maintain consistent strategies.

- By addressing the communication barriers that often accompany mental health difficulties, SLTs improve access, engagement, and recovery outcomes across the whole system.

Why this matters

- Addressing SLCN in children and young people is crucial to reducing exclusions, and breaking cycles of disadvantage.
- Embedding speech and language therapists in mental health pathways ensures public money is not wasted on therapies that cannot succeed without communication adaptation.
- Investment in early intervention can reduce demand on education, justice, and NHS services in the long term.

Why communication matters

- **Risk factor:** Research suggests having language and communication difficulties can make children more vulnerable to anxiety, depression, behavioural difficulties, and psychosis.
- **Barrier to treatment:** Most psychological assessments and therapies depend on spoken language; children with unidentified SLCN may be unable to access diagnosis or treatment
- **Driver of exclusion:** Children with SLCN may have problems understanding what others say to them – for example, understanding instructions. They may appear to be uncooperative and disobedient, eventually resulting in school exclusion and, in extreme cases, criminalisation.
- **Protective factor:** Good communication skills help children to make friends and maintain relationships, regulate their emotions, and participate in education and society.

Current challenges

Under-identification

- SLCN is often a hidden disability; many children and young people go undiagnosed until crisis point.

Inequitable access

- CAMHS often lack embedded speech and language therapy support.
- Variation between local areas leads to a “postcode lottery”.

Workforce capacity

- Speech and language therapy vacancies are high across England, limiting specialist input to mental health teams.

Recommendations

Recognise SLTs as core to CAMHS

- Embed speech and language therapists in all children and young people's mental health services.

Universal workforce training

- All professionals working with children and young people should be trained to identify and respond to SLCN, and to understand the links between SLCN and mental health.

Adapt therapies for communication needs

- Ensure NICE guidance on adapting interventions for children and young people with SLCN is fully implemented.^{iv}

Research and investment

- Fund further research on the impact of speech and language therapy in improving mental health outcomes for children and young people.

For more information

- Visit: <https://www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/clinical-information/social-emotional-and-mental-health/>
- Contact: elissa.cregan@rcslt.org

ⁱ NHS Digital (2018). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017: Multiple conditions and wellbeing.

ⁱⁱ Hollo, A, Wehby, J.H. and Oliver, R.M. (2014). Unidentified Language Deficits in Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A MetaAnalysis. *Exceptional Children*, 80(2), 169-186.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cohen, N., Farnia, F. & Im-Bolter, N. (2013) Higher order language competence and adolescent mental health. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 54 (7), 733-744.

^{iv} <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng213/chapter/recommendations-on-specialist-support-for-disabled-children-and-young-people-with-particular-needs>